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Focus on projects that—when completed—put Iraqis back to work

By LuAnne Fantasia
Gulf Region North District

COB Speicher, Iraq—"How do we measure the encouragement and the hope a new school gives children eager to learn; or the security of having a health clinic in your village for the first time; or the comfort of electricity 12 hours a day verses two hours a day this time last year? We can't."

Col. Mike Pfenning is the commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region North district. In the four years since GRN was activated Jan. 25, 2004, it has completed more than 1,300 reconstruction projects in 66,000 square miles of northern Iraq.

"To borrow a famous quote from an unknown author, we gave the Iraqi people 'a fish and fed them for a day'...and now we are 'teaching them to fish, so they can feed themselves for a lifetime,'" Pfenning said. "They realize they need to take hold of the reins of independence and self-sustainment."

With U.S. government funds, the reconstruction program has provided a jumpstart to the governance and economy of Iraq with specific types of local projects for U.S. customers, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Department of State, Brigade Combat Teams, Military Construction, and the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq.

In the seven northern provinces that comprise Pfenning's district, that jumpstart includes more than 580 schools and primary healthcare clinics; 180 electrical projects; 233 security and justice facilities; 260 water and sewage treatment plants; 40 oil improvements; and 100 roads and bridges. Ongoing construction contracts include an average of 643 Iraqi workers a month, based on the last two fiscal quarters.

Pfenning said there are varying levels of success at the provincial level in renewing the Iraqi peoples' confidence in their leaders, and that part of good governance includes infrastructure planning, development and execution of annual provincial budgets to meet its citizens' needs.

"Once the Iraqi people know their government can provide them basic services in electricity, fuel and water, their societal needs will expand in other economic areas," he said.

"We will continue working with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams to focus project efforts on essential services," Pfenning said, "but will also target projects that, when completed, will put Iraqis back to work," e.g., Vocational/Technical schools, asphalt plants, police academies, and water distribution networks for a Farmers' Co-op.

GRN's higher headquarters, the Gulf Region Division, has other capacity-development initiatives that include operations and maintenance for completed (Iraq's) Economic Support Fund projects, as well as city master plans and facility management. Initially funded with U.S. Government dollars, they are also hiring local Iraqi engineers to supplement provincial engineering capability through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs, according to Pfenning.

He said, "Maj. Gen. Hertling, the commanding general of the Multi-National Division-North, or MND-N, and 1st Armored Division, owns the battle space—GRN's 66,000 square miles. In the recent MND-N Reconstruction Board, he announced his goal is to create an additional 50,000 jobs in the northern seven provinces before July 15 to develop the country's economic capacity—the next step in weaning the Government of Iraq from U.S.-funded efforts.

"I expect GRN's future projects from the PRTs and Brigade Combat Teams will focus on these same priorities; using the Economic Support Fund, Quick Response Fund and the Commander's Emergency Response Program funds.

"The sooner the Government of Iraq improves its ability to plan, develop and execute their infrastructure budget, the sooner we'll work ourselves out of a job in Iraq—the ultimate goal of the Coalition Forces in Iraq," Pfenning said.

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